

Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., yesterday joined U.S. Representative Melvin L. Watt (D-NC), Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), U.S. Representatives John Lewis (D-GA), John Conyers (D-MI), Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL), and a host of other members of the Senate and House leadership and Judiciary Committees to introduce bipartisan and bicameral legislation to reauthorize and extend critical sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) for another 25 years.

Jackson said, "This legislation, called the 'Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006,' will extend the VRA for 25 years and update a number of provisions of the original law to take into account continuing discriminatory obstacles to voting and full enjoyment of the rights of democracy by minority voters. The legislation will also clarify some provisions of the Voting Rights Act that Congress has concluded have been misinterpreted by the United States Supreme Court.

"I'm pleased to join my colleagues, both Democrats and Republicans, as a co-sponsor of this bill. I look forward to its early passage in the House, hopefully before the Memorial Day recess, with similar quick action in the Senate so that, hopefully, on August 6, 2006 - fully one year before it will expire - the President will sign it into law. This is critically important legislation because it will restore the law's original intent to protect the rights of minority citizens to participate in the political process free of racial discrimination at the ballot box. The continued pervasiveness of racially polarized voting in the jurisdictions covered by the VRA's expiring provisions demonstrates that racial and language minorities remain politically vulnerable, warranting the continued protection of the VRA for another 25 years," Jackson said.

Key provisions of the VRA that would be reauthorized and extended by the bill include:

*Section 5, which requires jurisdictions with a history of discrimination in voting to get federal pre-clearance of any new voting practices or procedures before they may be implemented;

*Section 203, the bi-lingual ballot provisions that ensure that some citizens with limited English proficiency are able to read ballots in a language they can understand; and

*Sections 6 - 9, which authorize the Attorney General to appoint federal election observers where he finds evidence of attempts to intimidate minority voters at the polls or prevent them from exercising their right to vote freely.

Leading up to the introduction of the bill, the House Subcommittee on the Constitution held 10 hearings to receive oral and written testimony from witnesses, including supporters and opponents of reauthorization. The hearings examined the effectiveness of each of the expiring provisions in remedying discrimination and protecting minority voters over the last 25 years, as well as their continued need going forward.

"The comprehensive record established by the Committee strongly supports reauthorization of the VRA and I believe this record will be vitally important in ensuring that the resulting legislation can withstand an almost certain constitutional challenge," noted Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), House Judiciary Committee Chairman. "The Committee's record demonstrates that, while progress has been made, vestiges of discrimination are still present in certain parts of the country."

"Our journey toward equal voting rights still requires extreme vigilance on the part of Congress," said Rep. John Conyers, Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee. "However, this day is a tribute to those brave individuals of all races who risked their lives to pursue the simple right of all Americans to participate in their government, as well as an assurance that the right to vote without discrimination remains solid law."